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ABSTRACT

Theoretically, the relationship between boards of education and school administrators is well-defined -- the board makes policies, and the superintendent implements those policies. However, the lines of responsibility are not that clear-cut, leading to a variety of problems involving school boards and administrators. In examining documents dealing with the board-administrator relationship, this review focuses on maintaining the harmonious relationship, contemporary issues and solutions, and the future. A common theme is that mutual respect, trust, and support between board members and superintendents are key elements in any successful educational organization. Some of the contemporary problems discussed include ways of changing the present school system, legal and social accountability, imbalances of power, and collective negotiation. Predictions about the future, centering primarily on school boards, range from suggestions for revised functions to replacement by "consensus organizations." Ten of the documents are available from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service. (Author)

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September 1973 Number 22

Board-Administrator Relationships

Nan Coppock

In the editorial offices of the *American School Board Journal,* there is a file labeled "Board-Staff Strife." It contains letters from school board members seeking help in getting along with—or getting rid of—their superintendents. Complaints range from drinking and "playing around" to failure to keep the board informed, the latter outnumbering all other types of pleas and accusations in the file ("How to Fire a Superintendent" 1972).

The board-administrator relationship can be a most pressing problem for a school system. Board members often feel that administrators manipulate board meetings. Superintendents and principals, in turn, accuse board members of being overly concerned with trivia and of unrealistically demanding that administrators back up proposals with extensive facts and figures.

Ever since the early 1800s, when boards first decided "to take . . . existing power or duties, and to throw them upon the superintendent" (Cooper 1972), the relationship between boards and administrators has been under constant discussion. Traditionally, the school board is conceived of as a policy-making body and the superintendent as the chief administrator in charge of implementing those policies. The lines of accountability are not that clear-cut, however. Responsibilities overlap, roles change, imbalances of power exist, and societal pressures impinge on the school. Present trends indicate that the governing bodies of our schools will

rely increasingly on theories and practices borrowed from the legal and administrative professions.

In examining documents dealing with the board-administrator relationship, this review focuses on the harmonious relationship, contemporary issues and solutions, and the future. Among contemporary problems, collective negotiation receives special attention.

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THE HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIP

Numerous documents discuss the promotion of harmonious relations between board members and administrators. Some studies hope to avoid problems through preventive measures. The Pennsylvania School Boards Association (1972) has published a pamphlet containing guidelines for successful board meetings. Lists reprinted from the Vermont State School Directors Association *Newsletter* delineate what a superintendent should expect from his school board and what the board should expect from its superintendent.

Also included in the Pennsylvania publication are checklists composed by Dr. J. A. Kinder reviewing the decision-making process and the relationship roles of board members and superintendents. Dr. Kinder proposes inservice training for both parties.

Herman (1972) tells how teachers, administrators, and board members in one school district solve internal information and communications problems through workshops. The program consists of two weekend workshops a year devoted to a combination of seminars and brainstorming.

An Educational Policies Development Kit for improving board-superintendent relations is available from the National School Boards Association (1971). It emphasizes the importance of written policies to formalize understandings, to delineate separate leadership roles, and to facilitate long-range governance by the board and day-to-day management by the superintendent. Board policy samples and other policy resources on the board-superintendent relationship are provided.

The California School Boards Association (CSBA) and the California Association of School Administrators (CASA) have jointly published a series of guidelines, edited by Wennerberg (1967), for the development of mutual cooperation between board and superintendent. Particular attention is given to the board's role in formulating district policy, establishing effective board-community relations, selecting and evaluating the superintendent, and filling board vacancies. The complex role of the school superintendent is defined with respect to his responsibilities to the board, the community, and his staff.

Proceedings of a regional conference for school administrators are reported by Friesen and Bumbarger (1970). Contributors discuss the board-administrator relationship from different perspectives. Jones describes the hallmarks of an ideal relationship, which consists of equal partners working together.

Other papers from the conference discuss the establishment of this ideal relationship from the board member's point of view (Beinder) and then from the administrator's (Gathercole). Beinder notes that superintendents must understand the board

member's responsibility is to the electorate while the superintendent's is to the board. The superintendent should perceive of himself as a leader rather than as a middleman, according to Gathercole. A major theme in all the papers is that mutual respect, trust, and support between board members and superintendents are key elements in any successful educational organization.

A booklet by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (1971) explains the administrative team approach and argues for greater participation of the principal on this team. The team concept provides a formal agreement for administrators and an internal structure that enables principals to participate in important decision-making. Also included is a typical board-administrator agreement.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AND SOLUTIONS

The need to clarify and strengthen board-administrator relationships has even greater significance now than in times past. Reasons cited are the antiquity or nonexistence of written policies and administrative procedures, accelerated turnover in board and administrator personnel, and the impact of negotiations (Bates 1971).

According to Sullivan (1972), the whole school system is coming apart at the seams. His solution urges adoption of a model in which local boards are elected by their communities and regional boards are selected by the state supreme court from candidates nominated by the local boards. Regional boards would set board policy objectives and hire a chief executive to carry them out. A committee of teachers, students, and parents would choose the school principal and set job objectives for him.

According to Sullivan, this model affords three basic advantages. First, control is shifted from state legislatures and presently unsatisfactory school boards to neighborhood and community groups. Second, a single executive is responsible for the administration of the system. Third, retention of the chief executive and principals alike rests on successful performance in meeting annual objectives.

Accountability to the public depends on accurate assessment of administrators' and teachers' performances (Lamb 1972). Since from the board's point of view accountability must concentrate on the school superintendent, it is essential that his evaluation be carried out in an atmosphere of commitment and trust. Lamb suggests management by objectives (MBO) as an effective approach to such evaluation. Focusing on job results rather than on the individual personality, MBO also allows the superintendent to work with the board in setting manageable and attainable objectives for his position.

Another aspect of accountability is discussed by Wynia (1973), who quotes from Harmon Zeigler:

> In most instances, the school board is the elected representative body speaking for "the public." Even when the board is appointed, its function is still a representative one. However, as is too easily the case when elected officials confront their administrative employees, the legal and the actual distribution of influence varies considerably. It is frequently the case that the resources of the superintendent are of sufficient value to cause the board to defer to him in the actual establishment of authority. The "rank" authority of the board loses out to the "technical" authority of the superintendent.

In response to the contention that school authority is being eroded, Wynia suggests

that the board is rightly losing its capacity for control over the actions of those in the established school hierarchy. Board members are having to forego their custom of utilizing pressure to influence the superintendent and each other.

Wynia warns that due process may be one of the most important issues facing school boards today. Board members and administrators who do not recognize the fundamental rights of students run the risk of finding themselves on the losing side of a lawsuit.

Concern is voiced by Cooper (1972) about the paradoxical position of the school board—ultimately responsible for attaining educational goals, yet lacking the same skills and staff assistance as administrative personnel have. To reduce this imbalance, Cooper suggests increasing the board's capacity to influence policy by supplying it with its own staff. He also reviews the board's legal and social responsibilities, noting that failures to fulfill these responsibilities are now being tested in the courts.

Jones (1973) believes that an adequate balance of power can better be achieved if board members are required to attain the same degree of professionalism as the administrators they hire. As a means of preserving effective lay control of public education, Jones proposes formalized training—voluntary or mandatory—for both prospective and incumbent board members.

Traditional boards should be replaced by professional boards appointed by state departments of education, according to Kammann (1972). He advocates the implementation of organizational development principles to build an effective board-superintendent team. For illustration, Kammann examines process problems faced by school boards and techniques for solution.

Robinson and Hall (1973) discuss how to accomplish changes within the school system. Contrary to basic assumptions in intervention theory, they find that

- it is not necessary to start a change program at the top—it is only necessary not to have *opposition* from the top
- the most pressing problems do not have to be resolved first—resolution of less pressing problems will create initial successes that will compound themselves and spread through the organization
- the change agent should not attempt to encourage collaboration between competing parts of the system—rather he should work around people who are strongly resistant to change and surround them with success so that, in time, they may opt for the change voluntarily

COLLECTIVE NEGOTIATION

In discussing the difficult position of administrators in negotiations, Wilklow and Versnick (1972) recommend a "management team approach" borrowed from the field of industrial relations. Two basic assumptions underlie this management team, which has a nonadversary role in negotiations:

- management must support board policy
- management members must be protected by written doctrine

On the other hand, Dempsey (1973) warns that unless school boards in the future are more responsive to principals' needs than they have been in the past, the team

idea will disintegrate. Principals will move to form bargaining organizations on a county or regional rather than a school district basis. Local and state boards of education will work to thwart the independent bargaining unit for principals.

In a study of administrators involved in formal collective negotiations for the first time, Roberts (1971) found that the administrator role in negotiations will increasingly identify with board expectations as older and more experienced incumbents retire or seek other responsibilities.

Urich and Hewitt (1971) summarize two research studies on administrator roles in collective negotiations. One study investigates the role of the superintendent as perceived by school personnel and board members.

The second study examines attitudes concerning the role of the principal in school negotiations. Types of educators are identified according to their perceptions of the principal as neutral or as representative of either the board or teachers.

Formation of administrator units for negotiating with boards of education should be undertaken with caution (Smith 1973). It is naive to think that negotiations will solve many, if not all, problems and that only advantages and no losses occur as a result of formal collective negotiations. Smith lists several critical checkpoints to be considered before the district's administrators are committed to recognizing an association for the negotiation process.

THE FUTURE

While most discussion of current problems focuses on the administrative side, talk about the future centers around the board. Predictions range from radical change in to abolition of school boards.

Maintaining it is nonsensical to say that schools are "above politics," Southworth (1969) contends that board candidates should be screened, sponsored, and held accountable by political parties. Because of continued growth and consolidation, he believes that future school board members will be elected regionally.

Revised functions for the 1980 school board are predicted by Southworth:

- Recognizing that it does not have local control of public education, the board will express its views to the superintendent in *general terms.*
- The board will conceive its principal function to be the selection and retention of the best educational leadership it can secure. That leadership will be retained so long as it satisfies the school district reasonably well, but contracts and tenure for the chief school officer will be nonexistent.
- No longer will the board be directly concerned with negotiations but will retain a professional negotiator.

Perhaps the traditional board will be replaced by a "consensus organization," a policy-making organization separate from the line and staff operation (Thiemann, in Friesen and Bumbarger 1970). With members coming from all ranks—administrators, faculty members, students, and the community-at-large—the consensus organization would represent the needs and desires of all people more adequately than does the present system. It is in keeping with the democratic process of American tradition that such an organization might take over the arena now occupied primarily by boards of education and district superintendents.

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Superintendents must understand that the board member's responsibility is to the electorate while the superintendent's is to the board. *Beinder* in *Friesen and Bumbarger (1970)*

Board members and administrators who do not recognize the fundamental rights of students run the risk of finding themselves on the losing side of a lawsuit. *Wynia (1973)*

The administrator's role in negotiations will increasingly identify with board expectations as older and more experienced incumbents retire or seek other responsibilities. *Roberts (1971)*

It is nonsensical to say that schools are "above politics"; board candidates should be screened, sponsored, and held accountable by political parties. *Southworth (1969)*

A "consensus organization" with members from all ranks—administrators, faculty members, students, and the community-at-large—might someday replace the traditional board of education as the school's policy-making organization. *Thiemann* in *Friesen and Bumbarger (1970)*

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